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**Zion as Proxy?**  
**Three Jewish Scholars of Nationalism**  
**on Zionism and Israel**

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# Introduction

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One of the curious facts about the study of nationalism in the twentieth century is that some of its greatest scholars were Jewish émigrés who found educations and then homes at Western universities. Scholars such as Hans Kohn, Salo Baron, Sir Isaiah Berlin, Elie Kedourie, Ernest Gellner, George Mosse, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith all shared the conviction that nationalism was a phenomenon to be taken seriously, and all share credit for reinvigorating its study during and especially after World War II. Only three are considered here: Gellner, Kedourie, and Hobsbawm, the leading proponents of the modernist approach to nationalism.

Each was an outstanding scholar who bridged several fields. Kedourie was a Middle Eastern historian and political philosopher, a profound student of British policy and critic of nationalism. Gellner was a philosopher and anthropologist, simultaneously a thunderous critic of unreason and a sensitive analyst of non-Western societies. And Hobsbawm was one of Britain's most relentless Marxist historians, known for his political activism, sweeping view of European history, and studies of jazz and others he saw as revolutionaries.

Their attraction to the subject of nationalism varied, but in no case was it nostalgia. Rather, it was a concern for the interplay of ideas and identity in politics. In an age of nationalism, Jews stood out, forcing these and other scholars to address the question of the "nation" in one way or another. Moreover, it is suggested here that the experiences of these three intellectuals as Jews and émigrés, and their attitudes toward Judaism and Israel, fundamentally conditioned their divergent scholarship on nationalism.

Connecting the inner and the outer man is an historiographic problem. How are milieus, personal histories, attitudes, and beliefs reflected in scholars' works? The mere facts of an individual's life cannot be said to correspond

exactly to his or her intellectual output. Nor can we psychologize, rotating facets of a life until an interesting and presumably telling refraction appears. The real task is at once factual and speculative, as is all historiography, but a systematic approach is needed (for recent examples of historiographic studies of scholars, see Judt 1998; Myers and Ruderman 1998; Lilla 2001; Hart 1999; Knepper 2005; and Hacoheh 1999). At one extreme is Kedourie's assertion that the historian matters little (Kedourie, 1984c). The opposite impulses are found in Hobsbawm's autobiography (Hobsbawm, 2002) and in efforts by Gellner's acolytes to collate his works and write a biography (Hall 1998; Hall and Jarvie 1996; see also the Ernest Gellner Resource Page).

But short of biographies that fully connect the inner and outer scholar, the task is to enter into a dialogue with historians to understand how their lives and thought conditioned our understanding of a key phenomenon: nationalism. Modernist scholarship is the primary lens through which many, including policy makers, see the issue. This paper discusses, to use David Gellner's words on his father's analysis of Wittgenstein, "the social context of ideas" (D. Gellner 1998, x), but ideas with more than academic significance.

Nationalism has been defined many ways, including by the three scholars considered here. Briefly, nationalism holds that the world is comprised of many different groups or peoples — defined by shared languages, descended from common ancestors, and with common histories and religions. Nationalism judges it proper for individual groups to exert political control over the discrete territories in which they reside; that is to say, nations should equal states. As a cluster of assertions this is controversial enough, but underlying are more fundamental and intractable questions: whether groups and their identities are "real" or "invented," of great antiquity or purely modern vintage; and whether identities are natural and necessary, shifting or fixed, arbitrary and even imposed.<sup>1</sup>

This paper discusses the work of Kedourie, Gellner, and Hobsbawm and their attitudes toward Israel and Zionism. These are emblematic of their

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<sup>1</sup> For the primordial, perennialist, and modernist interpretations of nationalism, see Smith 1998. For an historiographic overview, see Smith 2000.

larger approaches to nationalism and the question of identity in the modern world. They also exemplify some of the Jewish intellectual responses to modernity.

## Elie Kedourie: The Restless Intellectual as Anti-Romantic

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Elie Kedourie was born in Baghdad in 1926 to an old and prosperous family whose many branches included rabbis and traders. Though religious, he received a Francophone education at an *Alliance Israélite Universelle* school. In 1947, he clipped an advertisement from the *New Statesman* for an examination to be admitted to the London School of Economics. Coming to England, he studied at LSE and went on to Oxford, becoming one of its most famous non-Ph.D.'s. Kedourie wrote his dissertation on British policy in the Middle East at the end of World War I but steadfastly refused to make changes demanded by his distinguished examining committee, changes he regarded as purely speculative (Kedourie 1987). He withdrew it and took an appointment at the London School of Economics, where he remained until retirement. With the aid of political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, whose position he eventually assumed, the thesis was published in 1956.

Kedourie's thesis, published as *England and the Middle East*, completely overturned the romantic view of imperial history at whose center were figures such as T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, and which asserted the inevitability of imperial collapse and Arab nationalism. Through careful analysis of primary documents — first and foremost diplomatic reports and correspondence — he showed how decisions were made, consequences assumed or ignored, and mythologies woven. Two conclusions stood out: the loss of the British empire was not inevitable but rather resulted from a systematic loss of will on the part of decision makers; and, contrary to popular belief, Britain had not made incommensurable promises to Jews and Arabs with the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Kedourie 1970a, 1976).

Influenced by the then-ascendant historical approach of Lewis B. Namier, which demanded absolute mastery of primary sources, Kedourie stood utterly

at odds with the prevailing methods and assumptions of British Middle Eastern history. This quickly brought him into conflict with established figures such as Arnold Toynbee, as well as the many enthusiasts of British defeatism and Arab nationalism — the so-called Chatham House version — whose bane he would increasingly become (see Yapp 1995, 2005; S. Kedourie 2005; Rejwan 1997; Vatikiotis 1998; Karsh 1999; Friedman 1999, cf).

A long series of essays reveals his early focus on the consequences of nationalism in the Middle East. “Minorities” is one of his most remarkable, not least of all because it was originally written in 1952, when Kedourie was only twenty-six years old (Kedourie 1970c). It is also an obituary for Kedourie’s own community, the Jews of Iraq. In a tone at once admonishing and mournful, Kedourie describes how the importation of nationalism left the Armenian and Jewish communities, which had enjoyed measures of security and self-governance under the Ottoman *millet* system, in complete disarray. They could not comprehend the concepts or the forces unleashed among schemers who rose up and advanced nationalism. Nor could they comprehend the complicitous nature of British rule, which in promoting Iraqi nationalism, set up a foreign and incompetent leadership and both guided and stood aloof as it ran amuck.

With his remarkable command of the English language, Kedourie wove a double lament — for the folly of the Jews and the British alike:

Power the Jews of Baghdad could understand, certainly, and the coarse, capricious exercise of power. The right of conquest they could cheerfully acknowledge, for all their history had taught them that there lay safety. These things and these things alone lay within their experience, and how pitifully inadequate they were going to prove! It was not by the help of this experience that they would understand the strange, exquisite perversions of the western conscience: the genial eccentricity of Mr. Philby, proposing to make a thug who took his fancy the president of an Iraqi republic; or the fond foolishness of Miss Bell, thinking to stand godmother to a new Abbasid empire; or

the disoriented fanaticism of Colonel Lawrence, proclaiming that he would be dishonoured if the progeny of the sharif of Mecca was not forthwith provided with thrones. Yet it was with such people that their fate rested. (1970c, 301)

Minorities, including Jews, watched in horror as the British and nationalist forces attacked them one by one, from the rebellious southern tribes to the Assyrians in the north. The final blow was the pogrom of June 1941 against the Jews of Baghdad, during which some six hundred Jews were murdered as the British stood at the gates of the city. Kedourie himself this witnessed as a youth: “The Jews were terrorized and demoralized completely. They had been slaughtered and looted, and nobody had come forward to protect them. Their sense of security experienced a shock from which it was never to revive” (1970c, 308–309).

Into the void stepped nationalism in the form of Zionism. Like all nationalist projects, Zionism is intellectually incoherent to Kedourie, another unexceptional manifestation of the European nationalist groundswell. Only its social dynamics were atypical, riding the wave of patronizing Western intervention in the east. But it was also in social terms that Kedourie was, at least early in his career, opposed to Zionism. He points out how Zionist representatives opportunistically approached the tidal wave of Iraqi nationalism, abetting if not hastening the demise of the most ancient Diaspora community. The hapless response of minorities to these threats — first puzzlement and then half-hearted embrace — seems pathetic to Kedourie, but almost predictable: “Hence the atrocities incident to national self-determination, the destruction of these small frail communities with very limited political experience, who were unable to deal with such new and terrifying manifestations, and the origin of these perverted commonwealths of the east to which no good man can give his loyalty” (1970c, 315).

Nationalism is the problem, not the solution, and there is an element of stubbornness, almost absolutism, in Kedourie’s approach. His philosophy as an historian, even in chronicling this most painful and personal episode, required detachment, a resignation to the facts of the past;



but it also demanded a moral judgment regarding “the failure of nerve and morality which made attractive the exercise of power and influence without responsibility” (Kedourie 1970c, 316). The essence of Kedourie’s conservatism was twofold: the often tragic relationship of power and responsibility and the crooked timber of humanity, from which no straight thing was ever made. But he was a “passionate not a cynical Cassandra” (Mango 1998; see also O’Sullivan 2005). Iraq, and the fate of its Jews, were subjects to which Kedourie returned many times throughout his career (Kedourie 1970b, 1974c, 1989, 1998).

Kedourie’s 1960 book on nationalism begins with one of the most quoted assertions on the subject ever made: “Nationalism is a doctrine invented in Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (1993, 1). Kedourie regards nationalism as an ideology invented by disaffected European intellectuals, such as Fichte and Herder, building on Kantian notions of self-determination. The ideology was quintessentially modern: the internal state of freedom created by Kant could only gain reality when realized through the whole; “The state therefore is not a collection of individuals who have come together in order to protect their own particular interests; the state is higher than the individual and comes before him. It is only when he and the state are one that the individual realizes his freedom” (1993, 30). The ensuing critique of Zionism was concise: “In Zionism, Judaism ceases to be the *raison d’être* of the Jew, and becomes instead, a product of Jewish national consciousness” (71). The fallacy is again double: the imposition of a chimera above and beyond the individual and, for Jews, the substitution of that chimera for a relationship with God.

Nationalism could only be understood as ideological politics, which regarded society, *pace* Plato, as a canvas to be wiped clean. The elevation of the nation to the status of the real inevitably lead to investiture of the state as the sole, legitimate representative of the “people.” “A further moment’s reflection will lead one to see that the very attempt to wipe the canvas clean must entail arbitrariness, lawlessness and violence on a stupendous scale, such that the ideological vision of perpetual peace and joy must recede further and further into the horizon” (Kedourie 1993, xiv). His alternative

was constitutional politics, where the “object in view is to attend to the common concerns of a particular society, to safeguard it against foreign assaults, to mediate disagreements and conflicts between various groups through political institutions, through legislation and the administration of justice, and to uphold the law as being above and beyond sectional interests” (1993, xiii). Although his last two books are notable for their pessimism regarding the chances for constitutionalism in the Middle East, he saw a slender hope in the example of Turkey and, by implication, the necessity for politics to make decisive breaks with the past (Kedourie, 1988, 1992).

Confronted with criticism and evidence that ethnic identities were in fact deep and enduring, Kedourie stressed that these were “highly plastic and fluid” and that in modernity “it is very often truer to say that national identity is the creation of nationalist doctrine than that nationalist doctrine is the emanation or expression of national identity” (1993, 141). He articulated this viewpoint further, and in part explicitly in response to Ernest Gellner’s approach, in his monograph-length introduction to *Nationalism in Asia and Africa* (1970). In contrast to what he called Gellner’s “economistic” approach, in which industrialization and its dislocations became the driving force for the spread of nationalism, Kedourie held that the idea of the nation spread like a virus from Europe, specifically its German birthplace and French mutation, to the rest of the world via colonialism and imperialism. The language and concepts of nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalism are European, from Marcus Garvey to various forms of Arabism to Stalin’s interpretation of Lenin’s views on imperialism. To the idea that industrialization engendered nationalism, Kedourie noted that Britain and the US were the most industrialized countries on earth but experienced nothing like the nationalism that characterized Europe. And as to the assertion that oppression and poverty impelled people toward nationalism, Kedourie dryly noted, “Auschwitz, the *reductio, per terrore, ad absurdum* of nationalism, did not happen because the Germans were poor” (1970d, 20). For Kedourie, *nationality* in the sense of identity was not the issue; *nationalism* in the sense of an identifiable chain of transmission for transformative ideas that unleashed ideological politics was the overarching question (Grosby 1996).

In a comparative context, however, Zionism barely rates attention: “[I]n the first place, it is as completely modeled on European ideas as other nationalist ideologies outside Europe and thus presents no special or striking feature” (Kedourie 1970d, 149). But in the last decades of his life, Kedourie returned a number of times to the touchstones of Israel, Judaism, and Zionism. For much of his career, he was subject to irreconcilable accusations of being both a Zionist and anti-Zionist. Comments to the effect that “Oriental Jewry, which has nestled so long in the benign shadow of Islam and which Europe and Zionism have contributed so powerfully to dislodge and pulverize” (1974b, 104) no doubt contributed to the latter perception. His apparent enmity to Zionism is not wholly intellectual but stemmed in part from “[t]he state of mind of European Jews who, being introduced to a seemingly superior European culture in the eighteenth century and finding some of the foremost representatives of this culture, people like Voltaire, Kant, Lichtenberg, profoundly and eloquently anti-Jewish, believed that this too was a necessary part of the Enlightenment.” Kedourie sensed another double bind; Jews condescending to Jews was bad enough, but to do so using the terms of European anti-Semitism “becomes a prime example of that spiritual subversion by which Europe has given so refined a twist to ancient oppression” (1974b, 106).

As to Israel, Kedourie saw the conflict in stark cultural terms, wherein Christians and Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century challenged Muslim authority, setting a path “which in the end might even lead Jews to exercise power over Muslims who had hitherto believed in their divinely ordained right to rule over Christians and Jews” (1974a, 218). But to accuse Britain and Zionists of foisting what was to unfold on Palestinians was far too simplistic, “for no one in 1917 could have foretold the rise and triumph of Nazism which, by confronting European Jewry with sudden ruin and destruction, overturned the assumptions and expectations on which the Balfour declaration policy implicitly stood” (1974a, 219). Facile, *ex post facto* explanations were utterly insufficient, and Kedourie returned to the theme of the “twice promised land” in his *In the Anglo-Arab Labyrinth* (1976) to demonstrate that whatever the duplicity and incompetence of the British,

they had not promised control of what would become Palestine to both the Jews and the Arabs. More than anything else, Palestinian incompetence and violence had thwarted any solution to the problem, abetted by that of surrounding Arab states. That said, modern Israel and its politics were far from Kedourie's preoccupation.

The question of Islam, however, was never far from Kedourie's mind. This concern has its roots not only in Kedourie's personal experiences and perceptions of the Ottoman empire and its European successors, but in the essence of political Islam itself:

When, as came to be the case in Muslim history, there was a succession of tyrannical and unjust rulers, Ummayyads, Abbasids and those who came after them, an imperceptible but fundamental transformation took place in Muslim political theory. Obedience to Muhammad as the head of the Muslim polity had been mandatory because it was part of the religious duty of the Muslim, and necessary to his salvation. Now, obedience to the rule was a necessity because rule — even the worst — is from God, and provides that modicum of security without which the believer is unable to attend to the devotions necessary to salvation. Any ruler is better than none. Rule and religion are twins. (Kedourie 1980b, 36)

In modern times, Kedourie pointed to the religious vitriol heaped on Jews by Ibn Saud already in 1937 and the subsequent spread of Saudi-inspired hatred through pan-Arab politics, the covalence of Arab nationalism and Islamism, and Anwar Sadat's sly but fateful invocation of Islamist language in 1972 (Kedourie 1980a; 1980c; 1974a, 227). More than any Middle Eastern historian, Kedourie tried to alert readers to the religious dimensions of the Arab-Israeli conflict and Islam's confrontation with the West. Beyond this, in his view the religious dimension almost fatally undermined any chance of Western-style democracy taking hold in the Arab world (Kedourie 1992), a view that at first engendered backlash and more recently, recognition — in policy rather than academic circles (Carothers 2003).

Some have reached the incongruous conclusion that Kedourie was an

apologist for the British or Ottoman empires, despite his relentless criticism of their policies, policy makers, formation, and devolution (O’Leary 2002).<sup>2</sup> Nor does it follow that Kedourie’s critique was, as Toynbee and others like A.L. Tibawi accused him, simply a lament after the destruction of Iraqi Jewry (Tibawi 1971). Kedourie’s critique of empire was above all directed at failure to provide safety for imperial inhabitants. England was no less culpable than others. But Kedourie’s view of European *politics*, as opposed to those of England, was also unequivocal: “Britain with the longstanding stability of its institutions, and the peaceable and constitutional character of its politics, is now involved with a collection of states whose politics, ever since the French revolutionary Terror, have been turbulent, disagreeable, unstable, violent, and at times horrific beyond the bounds of imagination” (1990, 466). The ironic observation that overall the Ottoman empire provided a protective if unstable vessel for communal autonomy parallels Ernest Gellner’s “Hapsburg Dilemma”: that multi-ethnic “cultural nationalism” had developed in a sprawling, autocratic, and increasingly ramshackle empire. The potential for protection and justice resided in constitutionalism alone, and most certainly not in what Kedourie called “revolutionary revolution” (1984). As an historian, Kedourie does not speculate how empires might have evolved into constitutional democracies.

A 1983 article, “Religion under Stress,” reveals Kedourie’s evolving attitudes during the last decade of his life (1984e). Examining first Christianity, with its fading spirituality and rising appeals to social justice, and Islam, which associated secularism with its own fall from grace, he then turns to Judaism. Taking the challenge of secularization, he sees in Judaism two alternative “self-views.” One is traditional, where “the people of Israel are bound by a Covenant with God” and where “divine anger and divine mercy are the two poles which govern the course of Jewish history, horrors and catastrophes included.” The second is a modern perspective where Jews are “seen as simply one group among many which together constitute humanity... now set to enjoy equally with their fellow men all the rights and duties of citizenship, in a world where the inevitable spread of

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<sup>2</sup> Compare S. Kedourie, who calls this a “risible notion” (2005, 636).

universal education will eradicate ignorance and its two products, fanaticism and despotism” (1984e, 222–223). For Kedourie, the experience of Nazism proved Progress less than adequate; however, “What Enlightened Judaism cannot explain, traditional Judaism has the spiritual resources to cope with.” Even so, “often, within one and the same breast, the two self-views dwell in strenuous contention of uneasy coexistence” (1984e, 223). Perhaps he is describing himself.

But in modern times a third way appeared. Intellectually, Zionism was an adaptation of nationalism doctrine; “Only in a country of their own, Zionists hold, can the Jews survive and preserve their identity, their lives and their culture. On this analysis, homelessness is the central Jewish predicament” (Kedourie 1984e, 224). But “Israel has proved no remedy.” The dependence of Israel on the Diaspora, the distinction between Israelis and Jews, and the cutting off of Israel from its past were profoundly distressing. As was the opposite: “[T]o put the state of Israel at the centre of Jewish history, or consider it as the terminus and fulfillment of Jewish history, would be to look upon two millennia of Jewish life in the Diaspora as a mere preface and preparation for the establishment of the Jewish state” (1984e, 224).

Ironically, this critique is offered by Hobsbawm, although with dramatically different implications. But Kedourie also forcefully rejected Toynbee’s suggestion that Zionism deflected Jews from their true, “coelacanthic” mission, to lead the way to diasporic times and then disappear into a vaguely Christianized One World (Kedourie 1984a, 1984d).<sup>3</sup> Countering these perverse theories of Zionism, Kedourie pointed above all to the communal institutions that had transmitted Jewish tradition and identity. Kedourie blames modernity for Zionism’s canceling out both the traditional and Enlightenment self-views. In this, Judaism, perhaps even more than Christianity and Islam, is a victim of modernity.

But in these later writings, Israel is simply a fact: “[I]t came about, here is a society which is now a going concern, in all its variety and complexity, its tensions and complications.” War was forced on Israel, “a consequence of a strategic decision taken by the leaders of the Palestine Arabs long before

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<sup>3</sup> Compare Rabinowitz 1974.

1948.” This decision broadened immeasurably a “local quarrel.” Israel’s “forebodings and nightmares” now belong to all Jews, “and their power is enhanced by the memory of past disasters” (1984e, 225). As all participate in nationalism regardless of its intellectual merits, all Jews now share in Israel’s fate.

In one of his last major statements, Kedourie articulates these questions further, showing the evolution of his linked thoughts on Zionism, Israel, and nationalism. By the late 1980s, Kedourie had effected a personal reconciliation with Israel, prompting a clearer articulation of the socio-political forms that preceded nationalism and nations. When counterpoised with the question of Jewish identity, the overall answer to what preceded was civilizations: “By contrast, the issue of who, or what, is a Jew became problematic in modern times when countries of European civilization abandoned or rejected the religious criterion in citizenship, for it substituted birth, domicile, or membership in a nation” (Kedourie 1986). Countries, city-states, and empires were merely vessels for dominant religious identities and an ever-changing plethora of clan and kin ties. When these were shattered by nationalist thought, wholesale rearrangement took place. For Jews, however, survival had come not from politics but from “the certainty that God was infinitely greater than any particular polity” (1986, 27). Survival as dispersed diaspora communities had required ties forged by the law and its rabbinic interpreters, but in contrast with his previous view, Judaism’s “intellectual attitudes and assumptions” “found modern civilization not a threat but an invigorating challenge” (1986, 28).

But for Israel, the challenge was double.

The temptation would be very strong, therefore, to retreat into another world where somehow, as if by magic, secular reality, and the predicaments of living within a society of states, would vanish.

The flight from reality may take many forms. It may be a flight into utopianism — a utopianism which, indeed, infects so much of modern political thought, and which was present at the origins of Zionism, and

of socialist Zionism in particular. The belief here was that a society of self-determining nations, or of nations from which inequality and exploitation had been eradicated, would be one in which all conflict would disappear.

Or the flight may take the form, equally utopian, of confusing the existing state of Israel with that ideal state which will, in the fullness of time, be ruled by the Anointed One, the Son of David. “Out of Zion shall come forth the Law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem,” is a prayer recited in synagogue services; but the Zion and the Jerusalem of which the blessing speaks cannot be the present state of Israel and its capital. Unfortunately, in some religious circles in Israel the wish to see the two as one has issued, particularly since the 1967 war, in a messianism which has sought warrant in ancient prophecies, and searched for signs of their coming fulfillment.

The two forms of utopianism are far from novel or particularly modern temptations. With regard to the latter in particular, the rabbis long ago taught that the restoration of the House of David will happen in God’s own good time, that neither must it be hastened by human action, nor its advent computed and foretold. Firmly to lay hold of this injunction and all that it implies is the sure foundation of any Jewish political discourse rooted in reality, and adequate to the demands of the time. (1986, 29–30)

Kedourie saw nationalism as a European doctrine with a specific set of terms that had a catastrophic impact on the world. His intellectualist approach yielded little to either perennialist identities that eventually gained expression through states or ancient yearnings for territorial manifestation. For Kedourie, the fluidity of non-religious identities invalidated these arguments, and without historical evidence showing continuities of groups, consciousnesses, and territoriality, there were no nations in the premodern era. But Jews and Armenians are indeed ancient examples of nations (Grosby



1997, 1999) and it is ironic that these were the two groups that Kedourie had focused on so long ago in “Minorities.” In modern times, however, the path of nationalism had to be charted not through vague yearnings for identity, belonging, or place, but through concrete documents that demonstrated men shaping ideologies and politics. Thus the Jews stood both within and against the grain.

Kedourie was, first and always, an historian, tracing the documentary lineaments of the past to the present. The spirit of his critique of nationalism owes much to Acton, who for his part adopted a cultural approach and blamed France and the revolution rather than German intellectuals. But whether attributed to Rousseau or Fichte, Kedourie could not have helped but agree with Acton’s characterization of nationalist thought — that “by which a kind of fate is put in place of freedom” (Acton 1967). As a thinking person, Kedourie could not allow this. The nationalist idea had its ultimate origins with intellectuals who set it loose on societies which, knowingly or not, then make their choices. Trade-offs were everywhere and pointed to the imperfection of human institutions. God had chosen Jews, but Jews had chosen God and Israel.

Kedourie’s absolute insistence was that just societies be founded in constitutional politics, and he was convinced of the utter incompatibility of Islam with constitutionalism. These ideas stand as stark reproach to modern empire builders and delvers into root causes alike. Though a conservative, he was a proponent of interpretation over and against static conceptions, religions, institutions, and the state. The only issues were how and why to bring about change and whether change was possible at all. A defender of the rights of individuals, Kedourie believed, perhaps above all, in the necessity of holding those in power responsible. But at the same time, he was both a skeptic regarding human abilities and motives and a realist resigned to the continued existence of states, empires, and inhumanity. As he put it at the end of “Minorities,” “The dangers are manifold; the remedies scant and impotent.” (1970c, 316)”

## Ernest Gellner: On the Difficult Marriage of *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*

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Ernest Gellner was born in Paris in 1925 and raised in Prague. His was an urban, liberal, and fairly assimilated Jewish family that, in the words of his son David, “took the Jewish holidays, but went on picnics” (D. Gellner 2002). His family escaped the German occupation of Prague in 1939 and settled in England, where Gellner attended public school and received a scholarship to Oxford. But he enlisted in the Czech Armored Brigade, a “heterogeneous and hence very ineffectual” unit (Davis 1991, 64), and fought with it from the siege of German holdouts at Dunkirk back to Prague.

From his own description, as a youth Gellner had a strong independent streak, but his military service revealed to him that the world was not always as it seemed. In a 1991 interview, he recounted how the Czech Armored Brigade in fact

had a double hierarchy: the official hierarchy of rank, which was what people actually had on their shoulders, and the unofficial hierarchy of the communists, who had a private network of their own. There was a man who was a private who had enormous influence, and people used to come from other units to consult him and so on. He had been an officer in the International Brigade in Spain and reached the Czech Brigade via French concentration camps. Of course the other communists continued to recognise his rank, and when he finally crossed back into Czechoslovakia after the war he suddenly became lieutenant because the new communist authorities recognised his rank from the International Brigade. (Davis 1991, 64)

His resolutely negative view of communism was obviously colored by this

and other experiences, including witnessing the expulsion of three million Germans from Czechoslovakia after the war. Gellner returned to England, took a degree at Oxford, taught briefly in Edinburgh, and then took up an appointment at the London School of Economics. There, he was colleague and friend to Elie Kedourie, whom he credits with inspiring his interest in nationalism. After his retirement, he took an appointment at Cambridge, but then he returned to Prague where he remained head of the Centre for the Study of Nationalism at the newly founded Central European University until his death.

Describing Gellner's intellectual interests is a challenge in itself. He moved freely from philosophy to anthropology and sociology to modern politics. But Gellner's interests group around the core issue of the shared sense of reality and the deviations from or defiance of the same. Things were never quite what they seemed, and Gellner's career may be measured by his ever deeper appreciations of the quantum paradox of belief and identity. The middle scale of the nation was an especially vexing problem.

Gellner's intellectual career began by his trying to understand the means of approaching the common reality. His first work was in philosophy, leading to his controversial refutation of Wittgenstein and Oxford linguistic philosophers such as Ryle and Austin in *Words and Things*, published in 1959. Wittgenstein's approach, today generally called ordinary language philosophy, held that the proper object of philosophy was analysis of the assertions inherent in everyday speech, regardless of their foundation in external reality. Language, rather than questions, constituted the proper means and subject of philosophy. Language could not capture reality, and philosophy was therefore, at least in Wittgenstein's later view, a form of therapeutic activity. Gellner's devastating attack created a famous conflict in the pages of philosophical journals and the *Times Literary Supplement*, and was chronicled by Ved Mehta in *The New Yorker* and then his *The Fly in the Fly Bottle* (1963).

The social implication of ordinary language philosophy was that the world was constructed by innumerable speech acts or linguistic inventions distinct to the individuals or small groups in agreement over the definition

of things. Gellner, influenced by David Hume and his senior LSE colleague, Karl Popper, thought this wholly incorrect and in fact dangerous (Gellner 1993). Gellner quotes Hume's warnings regarding the "parity of reasoning" that would lead one to embrace too much" and thereby open the world to relativism (1959, 215). Gellner posed twin objections, the first being the pure artificiality of the linguistic approach and the second the isolation of philosophy from the real world and any social concerns. The question was not relevance but the abdication of reason as a tool for broader social understanding.

For Gellner, linguistic philosophy was itself an interesting social phenomenon. Frequently overlooked is the subtitle to *Words and Things* — "A Critical Account of Linguistic Philosophy and a Study of Ideology." The volume concludes with a chapter on sociology, and Gellner makes clear that how and why philosophers came to believe the linguistic approach was a key issue: "It provides him with an area of thought where the social factors — the tacit choice of criteria of acceptability, for instance — operate, if not in an experimentally ideal state of isolation, at least in greater purity than they generally do in other fields. Philosophy, quite patently and also self-confessedly, is not a kind of thought which stands or falls with factual evidence..." (1959, 229). The same could clearly be said of nationalism.

Importantly, in later years Gellner described Wittgenstein's position as being that "there is no general solution other than the custom of the community. Communities are ultimate" (Davis 1991). The problem of communities and their construction, and the corollary sense of belonging, became the focus of Gellner's life's work. Through it all, he argued continually for the importance of reason and against the pernicious influence of Wittgenstein. Gellner's work on nationalism must be seen at least partially in this light. The fact that Wittgenstein was also of Jewish background must be considered, since the intellectual and social milieu of the Hapsburg Empire was critical for Gellner (Stern 2000).

Gellner's interest in understanding reality evolved from philosophy to anthropology, and into the related questions of communities and beliefs. His anthropological work in the Atlas mountains was partially inspired by

his interest in mountain climbing and also his perception in the early 1950s that “the solution to the Jewish national predicament by the establishment of the state of Israel would lead to a dramatic, tragic, perhaps insoluble confrontation with the Muslim world” (Davis 1991, 66). His interest in the Muslim world also arose out of his perception that it was unintelligible “given certain European assumptions” (Davis 1991, 68). His work on Marxist anthropology had similar roots, a profound interest in closed systems.

As to the closed systems, I suppose I have a horrified fascination with them, having been throughout my life deprived of convictions and faith. I have never gone through any period of conviction for any faith. People who have faith irritate me, fascinate me, and I would like to work out how they tick, certainly. Islam doesn't do anything for me because it is too distant, but Marxism and Freudianism were both part of the intellectual atmosphere in which I grew up. I never embraced either, but there was a persistent inner dialogue. And the same applies to Wittgenstein. Yes, it's a fatal mixture of fascination and horror. (Davis 1991, 69)

Islam as a functioning religion and Marxism and Freudianism as surrogate religions were the subjects of sustained investigations. But nationalism for Gellner had the characteristics of faith *and* structure, and it was evolutionary, appearing in the transition from agrarian to industrial life. These concerns were brought out in greater detail in his second major book, *Thought and Change*, an ambitious effort to demonstrate that philosophy had been superseded by sociology. In it he presents his first sustained critique of nationalism, inspired by Elie Kedourie's 1960 publication of *Nationalism*.

Gellner's opening sentence is almost as memorable as Kedourie's: “The central mistake committed by both the friends and the enemies of nationalism is the supposition that it is somehow *natural*” (1964, 150). He quickly goes beyond this assertion, which implies at least the potential for fluidity of identity, to state, “The truth is, on the contrary, there is nothing natural or universal about possessing a ‘nationality’; and the supposition that a valid political criterion can only be set up in terms of it, far from being

a natural or universal one, is historically an oddity” (150–151). But in an associated footnote, he reveals his central puzzlement: “But the fundamental problem is still — why should men have become particularly concerned about the ethnic rubric under which they survive?” (150, fn. 2) His long-term contention with Judaism, Israel, and Zionism maps the development of his thought about the content of identity. Why *should* anyone care about “ethnic rubric”?

Gellner’s parallel concern is the historical sociology of nationalism: “What are the political units for most of human history? Small tribal or village units; city states; feudal segments loosely associated with each other or higher authority; dynastic empires; the loose moral communities of a shared religion. How often do these political units coincide with those of ‘nations’, i.e. linguistic and cultural boundaries? Seldom, certainly only in a minority of cases, and then accidentally” (1964, 152). Having first questioned identity and belonging as human characteristics, Gellner sets these developments in an evolutionary framework where society need not equal culture. This was the basis of Kedourie’s criticism of Gellner’s “economistic” framework — that it removed ideas, perhaps free will, and moral accountability from history.

Whereas for Kedourie ideas in effect created nationalism, for Gellner the most important historical cleavage was industrialization, where the “minimal requirement for full citizenship, for effective moral membership of a modern community, is literacy” (1964, 159). From these flowed Gellner’s next condition: the role of education in creating “clerks” who then bore and reproduced “clerkly language” — in effect, high culture. This high culture, in contrast to illiterate, agrarian, or peasant culture, integrated societies into manageable bundles. But when literacy becomes sufficiently widespread — thanks to the spread of educational systems, print culture, and the technological needs of an industrializing society — new means of integration were required. This was nationalism, a reordering of ties according to cultural variables such as language and descent. This return to the past showed “the inverse relationship between the ideology and reality of

nationalism. The self-image of nationalism involves the stress of folk, folklore, popular culture, etc. In fact, nationalism becomes important precisely because these things are artificial” (1964, 162). His structural approach to nationalism — stressing literacy, education, and industrialization, and not culture — was both parsimonious and all-encompassing. It resembles a classical, Newtonian approach to social physics. Nationalism, that is to say, changing conditions rather than ideas, created nations.

Israel and Zionism were quickly assimilated to this system, but they do not figure prominently in *Thought and Change*. The only other mention is a tiny footnote in which it is stated that “a kibbutznik can be sociologically assimilated to an artificial peasant” (1964, 175, fn. 1), which suggests that Gellner was unaware of or disinterested in the ideological and sociological range of kibbutzim. His understanding of nationalism, as well as Zionism and Judaism, has at its core one overriding framework, the Hapsburg Empire, and one counterexample, Islam.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Gellner’s primary focus was North Africa and Islam. Examining this vast output, it becomes clear that his distinctive evolutionism — which ultimately found expression in the idiosyncratic *Plough, Sword and Book* — had its sources not simply in Darwin, but in Ibn Khaldun. Gellner’s largest interests built on many smaller investigations and address Muslim civilization as sort of counterpoise to Ibn Khaldun. They share one, overarching interest, and he quotes Ibn Khaldun: “Leadership exists only through superiority, and superiority only through group feeling.’ This is perhaps the most important single sentence in Ibn Khaldun’s sociology: domination, authority, are the rewards of social cohesion” (Gellner 1981a, 25). The need for cohesion requires shared content in an “ethnic rubric.” Put another way, when reviewing Kedourie’s *Nationalism in Asia and Africa*, Gellner notes, “Ideas and intellectuals may be the virus, but we really want to know why so many have been vulnerable to this particular virus” (1972, 122).

Entire religions and empires are discussed provocatively to assay why Islam is different:

Only Islam survives as a serious faith pervading both a folk and a Great Tradition. Its Great Tradition is modernisable; and the operation can be presented, not as an innovation or concession to outsiders, but rather as a continuation and completion of an old dialogue within Islam between the orthodox centre and deviant error, political order and anarchy, civilization and barbarism, town and tribe, Holy Law and mere human custom, a unique deity and usurper middlemen of the sacred, to cite the polarities whose linked opposition, sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent, seems perennially latent in Islam. (1981a, 4–5)

For Gellner, Islam is a strong variety of belief, divisible into high and low culture, possessed of old and new elements, always in stress, like nationalism. In these discussions, Judaism, Israel, and Zionism are foils and counterexamples, but Gellner's concern pivots around the question of social cohesion.

Freelance Jewish settlement in Palestine, without organisation, could hardly have withstood Arab opposition. Moreover, they could hardly have transformed a nation of non-farmers into farmers in difficult and initially most unrewarding circumstances. Zionism was fortunate in having, in Socialism, an ideology which already and independently pervaded the mental climate of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, and which, through its populist elements, prized collective work on the land without individual remuneration, and which thus ratified a human transformation which had to be accomplished anyway if Jewish resettlement of the land of Israel was to become a reality. (Without the presence of such an ideology, that resettlement might have resembled those European settler populations in Africa which were either driven out, as in Algeria, or forced into repellent extreme measures of a caste society, as in South Africa). (1981b, 112)

Gellner's observations assimilate belief to ideology, and then to cohesion; people belong because they must, not because they wish to.



By the later 1970s and 1980s, nationalism per se became Gellner's preoccupation, as it was in general in European political and intellectual circles. Nationalism as a belief system was faltering in Western Europe yet reappearing on its margins and in Eastern Europe. In response to a Marxist critic of nationalism, Gellner outlined specific criteria that demonstrated how nationalism was a result of industrialization: "It makes the crystallisation of 'nations' a *consequence* of (a) inequality, (b) the situation in which, unlike pre-industrial conditions, inequality can no longer be easily tolerated, and in which (c) the significance of culture ('nationality') in an economy requiring literate, educated personnel is very great" (1979, 274).

But scattered in his papers is a palpable lament over growing unreason, of which nationalism was an increasingly prominent strand: "[S]omehow the sky has become darker, lowering and menacing. There is a sense of civilization, liberty, decency being in a state of siege, more deeply precarious than before, more fragile, and also more rotten and betrayed from within" (1987b, 111). Nationalism was only one element that had made a belated comeback in defiance of his industrialization scheme. As Marxism faded as an object of practical belief and organization, it had been possible for Gellner to confidently juxtapose it with Islam and to regard Marxists as a kind of secular *umma* (1991, 1994a). But why the return to unreason and extreme "ethnic rubrics"?

The persistence of the sacred as a means of cohesion was a puzzling feature that Gellner addressed through Durkheim and greater emphasis on ideocracy, "a regime identified with a dogmatically imposed and seriously enforced belief system" (1987b, 116). The failure of communism lay at least in part with "its pantheistic attempt to sacralize the whole of social life, including (above all) the economy" (1992a, 40–41). The adaptability of Islam still caused him to marvel, particularly the veritable fusion of Shia and Sunni theology by Khomeini and the 1979 Iranian revolution, wherein "the martyrdom myths associated with the Imams turned out to be outstandingly effective, mobilizing masses for the ultimate sacrifice and on a massive scale, thereby making revolution possible. But when the revolution prevails, martyrs must give way to lawyers" (1987c), 144). But an undertone of

foreboding enters Gellner's later works on Islam. He writes, "A puritan and scripturalist world religion does not seem necessarily doomed to erosion by modern conditions. It may on the contrary be favoured by them" (1992b, 22). Reason's most powerful enemy, religion, was adaptable and possessed an emotional appeal that seemed irresistible.

With his 1984 book *Nations and Nationalism*, Gellner fully engaged the subject and its growing contradictions. With typical energy, he rethought his basic premises and elaborated new arguments. Gellner attempted for the first time to take questions of ideas and belonging seriously and create a Grand Unified Theory of nationalism. In doing so, he delved into what might be called the subatomic range of social physics, where particles are smaller and more numerous but their interactions still regular and predictable.

Part of his approach entailed a much more elaborate typology of nationalism. Literacy and education were still crucial, but Gellner also examined the conditions under which different combinations of liberty and inequality engendered nationalist responses. The variants included early industrialism, "Habsburg" nationalism, mature homogeneous nationalism, classical Western liberal nationalism, Decemberist revolutionary non-nationalism, and diaspora nationalism. (Gellner 1983, 89–96). His typology explicitly recognized that easy distinctions between high and low culture could at best be applied to what John Plamenatz and Hans Kohn had called Western nationalism, that of Italy and Germany, and perhaps England and France. But Eastern nationalism with "a high culture as yet not properly crystallized" (1983, 100) presented different problems.

Less typologically problematic was diaspora nationalism: "Some economically brilliant groups of this kind have behind them a long tradition of dispersal, urbanization and minority status: this is clearly the case of the Jews, Greeks, Armenians or Parsees" (1983, 105). But certain conditions were exceedingly difficult, namely the acquisition of territory. Quoting Trevor-Roper, Gellner notes that Zionism was the "last, least typical of European nationalisms," and he famously comments, "It solved a European problem by creating an Asian one, about which the Israelis have barely begun to think" (1983, 107). But qualifications regarding Israel and Zionism

denote gradual appreciation of what was previously counterintuitive — the persistence of identity, the resilience of community, and the yearning for home in spite of history.

Gellner now sounds almost approving about Zionism's success going "counter to the global trend: an urban, highly literate and sophisticated, cosmopolitan population was at least partly returned to the land and made more insular. Normally the nationalist process is inversely related to its own verbiage, talking of peasants and making townsmen. Here it was really necessary to make a few surrogate peasants" (1983, 107). Here and elsewhere a quiet celebration of peasants points to Gellner's attraction, personal and intellectual, to folk culture.

Perhaps from his growing unease over spreading unreason, Gellner returned in the 1980s and 1990s to the intellectual roots of philosophy and anthropology, each with prominent Jewish themes and participants. In a perceptive analysis of Hannah Arendt, he explored the Jewish response to Romanticism, demonstrating how by the eve of World War I the terms of community membership had changed "to the effect that during the Emancipation period one was asked what one *believed*, whereas now one was asked who one *was*" (1987a, 80). He begins to sketch an opposition between the bourgeois Viennese "individualistic-naturalistic" response to the dislocations of the late Hapsburg empire and the romantic "communal-naturalistic" response that led to fascism. He refuses to exonerate Arendt for her evasions regarding Heidegger and the philosophical bases of totalitarianism. The otherworldly nature of philosophy is another object of scorn: "If Hitler had won, there would without any doubt whatsoever have been a major philosophical industry on the Continent explaining why the victory was a culmination, a completion of a necessary and philosophically appropriate development" (1987a, 88). But an inescapably self-referential tone also emerges through his words: "Being a Jew is like awareness of sex or death: it is always present, there are no solutions for the problems it engenders, and one can only talk about it in aphorisms" (1987a, 84).

Gellner's despair seems to have increased, along with his sense of being a specifically, or characteristically, Jewish intellectual. He harbored no

illusions regarding Europeans present or future.

Sometimes, when I attend meetings of intellectuals on the continent of Europe, as I do quite often — meetings usually dedicated to topics such as liberalism or democracy — I get bored, and relieve my boredom with a private little game. I survey the participants and ask myself how many of them, and which ones, would also be here, in the same place, eagerly discussing the “Regeneration of Europe under the Nazis” had the war gone the other way. I would not be present, of course; but it is an amusing game, and it has seen me through some dull papers and speeches. (1994b, 146)

Health problems — which limited his ability to pursue his favored pastime of mountain climbing — also contributed to his despair, along with an “existential unhappiness” brought on by an unceasing drive to work (Macfarlane 2002).

The European world of post-communism and ethnic cleansing forced further changes in Gellner’s thinking. His 1997 book *Nationalism* paid eloquent tribute to Kedourie for stimulating his own work on nationalism and for correctly defying the then prevailing view that nationalism was natural. But the terms of his dispute with Kedourie were as clear as ever: “Nationalism is neither universal and necessary nor contingent and accidental, the fruit of idle pens and gullible readers. It *is* the necessary consequence or correlate of certain social conditions, and these do happen to be *our* conditions, and they are also very widespread, deep and pervasive” (1997, 10–11). But Gellner explicitly yielded ground to his former student and proponent of the ethno-symbolic approach to nationalism, Anthony Smith, further acknowledging the role of culture. While retaining his dividing line between the pre-industrial and industrial worlds, Gellner admitted nationalism could have deep roots and even ancient predecessors: “It is possible to seek the origins of nationalism in ancient Israel, where an inherently unique and potentially universal deity had, at least for the time being, a culturally distinct and exclusive clientele” (1997, 23).

His concluding chapter, famously titled “Do Nations Have Navels?”

summarizes his shift toward Smith's perennialist view, and symbolizes changes within the man himself. Power *and* culture are forces at work in creating nationalism, and continuities *are* important. "Cultures are sometimes invisible to their bearers, who look through them like the air they breathe, and sometimes heavily underscored and objects of great reverence and passion. There is, it seems to me, no valid general rule affirming either the volatility or the fidelity of men *vis-à-viz* their cultures" (1997, 94). This statement could apply equally to Gellner as to his subject. But his *choice* remains the modern, both personally and intellectually: "My own view is that some nations possess genuine ancient navels, some have navels invented for them by their own nationalist propaganda, and some are altogether navel-less. My belief is also that the middle category is by far the largest, but I stand open to correction by genuine research" (1997, 96). It appears the Jewish navel exerted subtle yet powerful influence on his thinking.

The last decade of Gellner's life seems possessed by encroaching darkness. Postmodernism was the subject of scathing rebuttal, as was psychoanalysis and, eventually, anthropology itself, at least its postmodern and postcolonial incarnations (Gellner 1985, 1995). His famous lament — that modern anthropology in its interpretive or hermeneutic turn had devolved into "the expiation of colonial guilt," valorizing the losers, or presenting them as deeply unknowable — is typical. Such mystifications were countered by advocacy of civil society, about which he wrote extensively. But the fundamental interpretive stances at work seemed to him deeply influenced by two familiar figures from the Habsburg past — Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bronislaw Malinowski.

Gellner's final book, which brought his life full circle, was a characteristically sweeping effort to discern structures and draw together the great themes that had shaped his personal and intellectual lives. Wittgenstein and Malinowski were cast as the philosophical and moral poles around which much of the twentieth century had revolved — individualism and holism, *gesellschaft* and *gemeinschaft*, the isolated or the shared sense of reality. Growing out of similar Habsburg environments, each had taken radically divergent paths, which were also emblematic for assimilated Jews.

Wittgenstein created an atomized framework based on logic and later language, which was inclined toward a kind of community or nationalist orientation. Malinowski, on the other hand, was interested in shared cultures but insisted that anthropologists keep their distance. But Malinowski also held a key to the problem of nationalism: “Malinowski was a cultural nationalist, not merely on behalf of his own nation but on behalf of all of them. But he was not a political nationalist and emphatically did not follow Hegel in supposing that nations only found their fulfillment and maturity in possessing their own state” (1994c).<sup>4</sup>

The implications for the study of nationalism pertained to what Gellner called the “Habsburg dilemma,” the fact that multi-ethnic “cultural nationalism” had developed in a sprawling, autocratic, and increasingly ramshackle empire. The ultimately unstable balances between what were in essence local *gemeinschaften* and a larger, rational, liberal *gesellschaft* fascinated him, and seemed a way to address the problems of nationalism in the present. Kedourie’s “imperialism” often seemed to focus on similar themes: balances where things had their place and communities coexisted with less friction. Kedourie’s examples point to a parallel “Ottoman paradox,” but in neither case could the center hold. It is especially vexing for Jews in these liberalizing orders, caught in a bind where “the stigma continued to attach to such origin, even if it no longer had any formal legal sanction” (1998, 33).

Gellner noted that for some Jews the stigma ran even deeper: “It condemned them to self-hatred and self-hatred was their lot: as many of them had considerable literary talents, they expressed and recorded it with eloquence” (1998, 38). Even as old boundaries were being traversed, new ones were formed. For some, including nationalists, this presented opportunities “to enlarge their own nation’s demographic strength or to extend the range of its territorial claims. Not always, however: the boundaries were less easy to cross for categories of people too profoundly tainted by the stigma of rootlessness, especially if their talents (due, for instance, to a long tradition of urban commercialism and scripturalist tradition, which

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4 For a discussion of Malinowski’s views on nationality and identity, see Gross 1986.

constitutes good training for the literacy-oriented style of modern life) made them dangerous rivals for the best positions in the emerging ‘national’ community” (1998, 38). What then for an “ethnic rubric” suddenly at odds with a navel-seeking environment?

The fact that Wittgenstein and Malinowski were both finding their ways out of and into new contexts is absolutely vital, and Gellner again appears as though he could be talking about himself:

In modern society some men will indeed feel lonely and socially alienated, without necessarily being pushed in this direction by epistemological argument proving that they must be locked into the island of their own consciousness. The system of ranks was dissolving, the supportive sub-communities conferring positions on individuals were being eroded, and some individuals may have risen economically whilst not gaining corresponding acceptance in the world to which otherwise their wealth would entitle them. They may have lost the support of their erstwhile community, either because they had left it or because it no longer existed, or both, and at the same time they may be stigmatized as unwelcome upstarts in their new milieu. They may be caught between a liberal doctrine, on the one hand, which tells them they are full members of society and, on the other, an illiberal romantic mood which denies them full membership, and tells them into the bargain that they are the perfect example of anti-man, of dehumanised rootlessness, of all that is wrong with the modern world. The eloquence of the romantic poetry and metaphysic which carries this message may be so persuasive that it convinces the victim even more than its beneficiary. (1998, 44–45)

Wittgenstein, the Solitary Transcendental Ego, had the “escape rope of language” and withdrew into himself and “all those cosy communal *Gemeinschaften* with their village greens and folk dances and music, and their newly emerging political-cultural movements, each with its own National Theatre, National Museum, youth movement, forged historical documents, and so on. Oh, there most definitely is a place to go to ... no

doubt about that. But you can't get in" (1998, 82–83).

Kept out, the pariah group needed other means, especially given that with liberalization its achievements made it the object of increasing attacks and discrimination. European culture reacted in a number of ways. These included outright discrimination; philosemitism, often “with ambivalence and irony: praise is accompanied by a deprecating smile” (1998, 102); and, through Romanticism, simply negating merit without roots entirely. “What would be a virtue for a universalistically oriented, liberal mind can turn into a vice if it fails to have communal or ethnic ‘roots’” (1998, 104). This insight penetrates deeply into the ongoing postmodern European attack on Israel and Jews — that is, the Romantic negation of the pariah due to its rootlessness.

But Cracow-born Malinowski, the “William the Conqueror” of social anthropology (1998, 114), showed another way. Thanks in part to Ernst Mach’s radical empiricism, he rejected “magpie atomism,” the mere study of isolated beliefs and unobservabilities of evolution, focusing instead on cultures as wholes. “Malinowski endowed the holistic sense of the unity of culture with a new and severely empiricist rationale, and exiled the past in the name of severe empiricist standards. The Malinowskian past was not an inference, it was a social function *in the observable present*” (1998, 135). Politically, this led Malinowski, the Polish cultural nationalist, to a kind of liberalism: namely, an endorsement of the Indirect Rule of the Habsburgs. The underlying equation, which Gellner also endorsed, is “Indirect Rule = Habsburg practices = League of Nations with teeth,” while after communism

it would seem that some solution along the lines proposed by Malinowski is the only humane one, the only one with some prospect of implementation without major loss of life. Colonise simply everybody — i.e. deprive their political units of sovereignty — whilst allowing them absolute cultural freedom of expression, thereby incidentally depriving boundaries of some of their importance and symbolic potency. It is not easy for states to own territory jointly, but there is no reason whatsoever why more than one culture — each operating



through its own TV network, educational system, etc. — should not function, and very effectively, on the same territory. (1998, 144)

In the end, fated to marriage, *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* would somehow have to learn to get along. Such reconciliations are difficult and require constant attention and thought. Thus Gellner, the self-proclaimed “Enlightenment Puritan,” was also partial to Bohemian folk songs and “could have written the book on nationalism which I did write, were I not capable of crying, with the help of a little alcohol, over folk songs, which happen to be my favourite form of music” (1992c; 1996, 624).

Gellner has been criticized for an ahistorical perspective, but in his work on the Habsburg dilemma he came as close to grounding his theory of nationalism not simply in history, but in philosophy. At the root, Gellner was a sociologist forever in search of the deep and broad structures of the present. Most notable of these was the nation, a form contingent and evolutionary, yet which required enough cultural content to remain cohesive, a pull on men’s hearts. His theoretical frameworks were intimately grounded in philosophy, the highest of high cultures. Despite philosophy’s weaknesses and his disparagement, ideas were the ultimate means of effecting social cohesion. But the human need and desires for navels, to feel connected, reasserted itself, perhaps in Gellner himself. To *have* a navel was deeply desirable, even necessary. The persistence of Zion demonstrated these, among other things. Gellner was Czech, as Malinowski had been Polish; the nation exerted a pull. And while he was an Assimilated Jew, of a particular Central European tradition, he was not, in the end, a deracinated one. Gellner’s search for structures and patterns collided with the uncertainties of the quantum level, the unpredictability of human faith and belonging. In the end he yielded to uncertainty but with the caveat that the terms of the marriage had to be carefully drawn.

## Eric Hobsbawm: Self-Invented Man or the Prophet Denied

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Eric Hobsbawm is the most difficult of the three scholars to discuss. He is the only one who remains alive, and he remains a larger-than-life figure, both in the discipline of history and to the European left. With the publication in 2002 of his autobiography, *Interesting Times*, we have a renewed opportunity to focus on his work. Running throughout are themes of worlds lost and futures found, delicate balances disrupted and the fragility of things, and those left behind. There is one overarching villain — nationalism and its archetype, Zionism.

Hobsbawm was born in Alexandria in 1917 and raised in Vienna. His father died when he was eleven. The family fell on bad time and his mother died two years later. Thirteen-year-old Eric was shipped off to relatives in Berlin, where he witnessed the death of Weimar and the rise of Nazism, and became in turn a passionate communist. In 1933 he was sent to public school in England where he became a socialist activist. He won a scholarship to Cambridge in 1935 and was part of the circle of communists that had included the famous spies Blunt, Burgess, and Maclean. After undistinguished military service, Hobsbawm returned to Cambridge, finished his degree, and took a position at Birkbeck College in London. But he found advancement blocked by his communism. He was a founder of the famous communist Historian's Group (which included E. P. Thompson), weathered the dual crises of 1956 (the invasion of Hungary and Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin), yet remained in the party. By the late 1950s, he had settled into a peripatetic and dual life, as activist and historian, traveling the world. Books such as *Primitive Rebels* and *Revolutionaries* and an endless stream of reviews on jazz and the modern scene established

Hobsbawm's reputation as a historian of labor and the underdog. By far most impressive was his four-part history of the modern world, *The Age of Revolution, 1789–1848*, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875*, *The Age of Empire, 1875–1914*, and *The Age of Extremes, 1914–1991*. Now retired, he is feted as a paragon of historical industry and political dedication.

The dimension Hobsbawm reveals most fully in his autobiography is his communist belief. Many have commented that his communism was a surrogate religion and cast his historical writings in a particular light. It was long known that he was a party "activist" but it is now clear that evangelism pervaded every aspect of his life.

The Party (we always thought of it in capital letters) had the first, or more precisely the only real claim on our lives. Its demands had absolute priority. We accepted its discipline and hierarchy. We accepted the absolute obligation to follow "the line" it proposed to us, even when we disagreed with it, although we made heroic efforts to convince ourselves of its intellectual and political "correctness" in order to "defend it", as we were expected to do. For, unlike fascism, which demanded automatic abdication and service to the Leader's will ("Mussolini is always right") and the unconditional duty of obeying military orders, the Party — even at the peak of Stalin's absolutism — rested its authority, at least in theory, on the power to convince of reason and "scientific socialism." (Hobsbawm 2002, 134)

One can hardly imagine a more striking confirmation of Hannah Arendt's insight into the nature of communism, its astounding power to convince people to willingly become its victims.

But communism was also a surrogate family for Hobsbawm. His biological family was broken and what remained was unsatisfactory, thanks to its petit bourgeois outlook, its Jewishness, and its faith in the existing order. The party offered him the passion of shared outlook and effort rarely found in a real family, a sense of brotherhood akin to the scouting movement but possessed of a curiously limited range of real human emotions, at once both immediate and abstracted; "The Leninist 'vanguard party' was a combination

of discipline, business efficiency, utter emotional identification, and a sense of *total* dedication” (2002, 133). The desire for belief and belonging is palpable, as is a yearning for order and structure, reflected outward on to the world as virtues and the inevitable future, all with a curiously naïve and adolescent faith.

Hobsbawm is also possessed by his Jewish background, and every nuance of his description is telling. He attended afternoon Hebrew school at his mother’s insistence but found it “uninspiring.” Characteristics acquired by that choice proved short-lived: “I also acquired a knowledge of printed Hebrew characters which I have since lost, plus the essential invocation to the Jews, the ‘Shema Yisroel’ (the language was always pronounced in the Ashkenazi manner and not in the Sephardic pronunciation imposed by Zionism)” (2002, 21). His tendentious assertion regarding the Sephardic pronunciation of Hebrew being imposed by Zionism is a telling sign. But he admits, “Since nobody in the family celebrated Passover, took notice of the Sabbath or any of the other Jewish holidays, or kept any Jewish dietary rules, I had no occasion to use my knowledge” (2002, 21). An incuriousness regarding Judaism is reflected throughout his work, as is an absolute animus against Zionism to the point of willful distortion.

But Jewishness was imposed on him. “Though entirely unobservant, we nevertheless knew that we were, and could not get away from being, Jews” (2002, 21). It was inescapable, a condition that only grew more intense with the disasters of the 1920s and 1930s: “In short, there was simply no way of forgetting that one was Jewish, even though I cannot recall any personal anti-Semitism, because my Englishness gave me, in school at least, an identity which drew attention away from my Jewishness. Britishness probably also immunized me, fortunately, against the temptations of a Jewish nationalism, even though Zionism among the central European young generally went together with moderate or revolutionary socialist views, except for the disciplines of Jabotinsky, who were inspired by Mussolini and now govern Israel as the Likud party” (2002, 22–23). For Hobsbawm, becoming a communist was the only logical response to the world in collapse.

In an astonishing passage, Hobsbawm reveals what being Jewish meant and means to him. It deserves to be quoted at length, for it reveals the essence not only of his Jewishness, but his sense of self and his vision for the world.

What exactly *could* “being Jewish” mean in the 1920s to an intelligent Anglo-Viennese boy who suffered no anti-Semitism and was so remote from the practices and beliefs of traditional Judaism that, until after puberty, he was unaware even of being circumcised? Perhaps only this: that sometime around the age of ten I acquired a simple principle from my mother on a now forgotten occasion when I must have reported, or perhaps even repeated, some negative observation of an uncle’s behavior as “typically Jewish”. She told me very firmly: “You must never do anything, or seem to do anything that might suggest that you are ashamed of being a Jew.”

I have tried to observe it ever since, although the strain of doing so is sometimes almost intolerable, in the light of the behavior of the government of Israel. My mother’s principle was sufficient for me to abstain, with regret, from declaring myself *kofessoslos* (without religion) as one was entitled to do in Austria at the age of thirteen. It landed me with the lifetime burden of an unpronounceable surname which seems spontaneously to call for the convenient slide into Hobson or Osborn. It has been enough to define my Judaism ever since, and left me free to live as what my friend the late Isaac Deutscher called a “non-Jewish Jew”, but not what the miscellaneous regiment of religious or nationalist publicists call a “self-hating Jew”. I have no emotional attachment to the practices of an ancestral religion and even less to the small, militarist, culturally disappointing and politically aggressive nation-state which asks for my solidarity on racial ground. I do not even have to fit in with the most fashionable posture of the turn of the new century, that of “the victim”, the Jew who, on the strength of the Shoah (and in the era of unique and unprecedented

Jewish world achievement, success and public acceptance), asserts unique claims on the world's conscience as a victim of persecution. Right and wrong, justice and injustice, do not wear ethnic badges or wave national flags. And as a historian I observe that, if there is any justification for the claim that the 0.25 per cent of the global population in the year 2000 which constitute the tribe into which I was born are a "chosen" or special people, it rests not on what it has done within the ghettos or special territories, self-chosen or imposed by others, past, present or future. It rests on its quite disproportionate and remarkable contribution to humanity in the wide world, mainly in the two centuries or so since the Jews were allowed to leave the ghettos, and chose to do so. We are, to quote the title of the book of my friend Richard Marienstras, Polish Jew, French Resistance fighter, defender of Yiddish culture, and this country's chief expert on Shakespeare, "*un peuple en diaspora*". We shall, in all probability, remain so. And if we make the thought experiment of supposing that Herzl's dream came true and all Jews ended up in a small independent territorial state which excluded from full citizenship all who were not the sons of Jewish mothers, it would be a bad day for the rest of humanity — and for the Jews themselves. (2002, 24–25)

Jewishness is defined by exclusion, yet Hobsbawm was enraged by the inescapable fate of inclusion. Personal and political are conflated; Hobsbawm is self-pitying and self-approving, but with coyness and ambiguity pointing in only one direction. The "non-Jewish Jew" is explicitly revolutionary and calls for the extinction of Jewishness upon the achievement of universalism. Jewishness is thus assimilated to communism as perfection of the faith. And with the anger of a convert, he attacks the rivals to his own communist religion: Zionism and Israel. One could argue that Hobsbawm's entire *oeuvre*, in particular his work on nationalism, must be analyzed in the context of this statement.

Hobsbawm's historical orientation is grounded in assertions found in *The Age of Revolution*. The world of the present had its roots in the

political and industrial transformations of the late eighteenth century — fundamentally capitalist in nature — which began in England and France; and subsequent world history is characterized by uneven development caused by the rapid spread of capitalism. The transformations caused by capitalism were Hobsbawm's primary focus, but critically important were local patterns of resistance that "turned expansion into contraction. What is more, by 1848 this extraordinary future reversal of fortune was already to some extent visible" (1962, 20). History is therefore created not only from above but also from below, by workers and peasants, and, as the title of Hobsbawm's early books declare, by *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Labouring Men* (1964) (Hobsbawm, 1959, 1964). Ultimately, nations are as well. This is his one key insight into nationalism.

Jews do not figure prominently in Hobsbawm's early narratives of European history, but his discussions are nonetheless telling. Prior to the French Revolution, the majority of Jews are dismissed as inconsequential provincials "among whose mud the Chassidic Jews venerated their miracle-working rabbis and the orthodox ones disputed the subtleties of the law" (1962, 27). Even emancipation under Napoleon only warrants mention in passing. Of greater concern to Hobsbawm are opportunities afforded Jews after 1780 to escape their situation. The Jews of the East "continued to live their self-contained and suspicious lives among the hostile peasantry, divided only in their allegiance between the learned intellectualist rabbis of the Lithuanian orthodoxy and the ecstatic and poverty-stricken Chassidim. It is characteristic that of forty-six Galician revolutionaries arrested by the Austrian authorities in 1834 only *one* was a Jew" (1962, 234). Authority figures and outsiders are among Hobsbawm's most persistent themes, but in terms of the Jews, the critical distinction is between those who take the opportunity to escape and those who do not. The "backwards communities" are a persistent problem, particularly in the post-revolutionary age after 1848.

But with Emancipation, the Jews of the West "seized their new opportunities with both hands, even when the price they had to pay was a nominal baptism" (Hobsbawm 1962, 234). Examples include the

Rothschilds, who are not only rich but were “seen to be rich.” There is “flowering of Jewish talent in the secular arts, sciences and professions” — at whose pinnacle stands a curious pair, Karl Marx and Benjamin Disraeli — and a “sudden abundance of less eminent Jewish participants in West European culture and public life, especially in France and above all in the German states, which provided the language and ideology that gradually bridged the gap between medievalism and the nineteenth century for the immigrant Jews from the hinterland” (234–235). He confidently declares, “Cultural assimilation was the goal of all emancipated Jews,” but acknowledges, quoting Heine, “that Jews do not cease to be Jews, at least for the outside world, when they stop going to the synagogue” (275–276). To what would Jews, emancipated and otherwise, ultimately belong?

As Gellner pointed out from an evolutionary perspective, capitalism required new forms of social cohesion and authority, central to which were administration and literacy. Viewed from below, by the end of the nineteenth century there were a multitude of identities and languages spread throughout Europe and elsewhere, none of which were co-terminus with a state. Drawing on language developed by anthropologists, Hobsbawm saw fusion of the state with “an imaginary community of ‘the nation’” as key (1987, 148). From above, the advantages for elites to appeal to the “nation” were clear:

Authorities in an increasingly democratic age, who could no longer rely on the social orders submitting spontaneously to their social superiors in the traditional manner, or on traditional religion as an effective guarantee of social obedience, needed a way of welding together the state’s subjects against subversion and dissidence. The “nation” was the new civic religion of states. It provided a cement which bonded all citizens to the state, a way to bring those who appealed to other loyalties over state loyalty — to religion, to nationality or ethnicity not identified with the state, perhaps above all to class. (1987, 149)

Compulsory mass education, bureaucracy, and law courts were crucial means to manufacture citizens and nations. Some, however, were not



permitted to belong: namely, colonial peoples, immigrants, and Jews. For the middle classes, Hobsbawm proposes that anti-Semitism itself was an important strand of right-wing nationalism: “This anti-Semitism took aim rather against the bankers, entrepreneurs and others who were identified with the ravages of capitalism among the ‘little men’. The typical cartoon image of the capitalist in the *belle e,dc 194>poque* was not just a fat man in a top hat smoking a cigar, but one with a Jewish nose — because the fields of enterprise in which Jews were prominent competed with shopkeepers and gave or refused credit to farmers and small artisans” (1987, 58).

The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century racialization of identity preoccupies Hobsbawm. His focus is again not on the uneducated East but rather on the “cultivated” West, and Zionism is never far from the scene.

And yet, even within the zone of white skins, there was a striking contradiction between the offer of unlimited assimilation to anyone who proved his or her willingness and ability to join the state-nation and the rejection of some groups in practice. This was particularly dramatic for those who had hitherto assumed, on highly plausible grounds, that there were no limits to what assimilation could achieve: the middle-class, westernized, cultivated Jews. That is why the Dreyfus case in France, the victimization of a single French staff officer for being Jewish, produced so disproportionate a reaction of horror — not only among Jews but among all liberals — and led directly to the establishment of Zionism, a territorial state nationalism for Jews. (1987, 152)

But an unmistakably personal dimension to his racial preoccupation is only revealed much later; in the few recollections from the year before his mother’s death, the last was his “passing by a shop window framed by mirrors one afternoon and discovering what my face looked like in profile” (2002, 42).

Above and beyond other nationalisms, the coming of Zionism is for Hobsbawm an historic and grievous error: “Once again Zionism provides the extreme example, just because it was so clearly a borrowed programme which

had no precedent in, or organic connection with, the actual tradition which had given the Jewish people permanence, cohesion and an indestructible identity for some millennia. It asked to acquire a territory (inhabited by another people) — for Herzl it was not even necessary that the territory should have any historic connection with the Jews — as well as a language they had not spoken for millennia” (1987, 147). Language fascinates Hobsbawm, and he returns to it many times as a sign of Zionism’s invention of the past.

Hobsbawm makes clear that the normal human condition is to be multilingual, like himself, which implies a multitude of simultaneous identities. National cultures and compulsory mass education created linguistic monocultures that privileged specific dialects associated with ruling classes. But the global spread of English and mass media has created a two-class system — English as the international language of administration and commerce, and local languages as the tools of poets and nationalists. Linguistic balkanization, sometimes institutionalized under the guise of multiculturalism, is to him fraught with peril since it will “multiply the occasions for conflict” (1996, 1079). Multiple identities are critical to survival, but the *types* of identities must be carefully regulated, for some will certainly lead to perdition. Thus Hobsbawm strangely assails the British playwright and commentator David Selbourne as “a London ideologue, [who] calls on “the Jew in England” to “cease to pretend to be English” and to recognize that his “real” identity is as a Jew. The only people who face us with such either-or choices are those whose policies had led or could lead to genocide” (1996, 1067). Jewish identity must be soundly subordinated, for, like nationalism itself, it represents a fatal temptation.

And yet Zionism, like nationalism, did appear. Preoccupied by class, the nation poses a severe challenge to Hobsbawm’s religion. Marxism had proposed that the spread of capitalism would diminish national differences, but reality has been dramatically different. Hobsbawm has directed considerable energy to address this. Consonant with his approach that phenomena must be understood from above and from below, he has proposed complementary dimensions to nationalism. Like working class

parties, nationalism is thus an industrial age “by-product” of democratization, a sentiment of attachment that was invented and manipulated: “The basis of ‘nationalism’ of all kinds was the same: the readiness of people to identify themselves emotionally with ‘their’ nation and to be politically mobilized as Czechs, Germans, Italians or whatever, a readiness which could be politically exploited” (1987, 143). The need for people to believe and belong, and hence to be manipulated, was at the core of the new beliefs and structures of the nineteenth century. That is to say, nationalism is a form of false consciousness.

Hobsbawm sees late nineteenth-century nationalism allied with “patriotism” and hence largely of the right — therefore directly ancestral to fascism. It also applied, in a way he claims alien to the “liberal phase of national movements,” to groups large and small, regardless of economic or other logic. The proper container for the nation was assumed to be the state, and nations were increasingly defined according to ethnicity and language. Nationalists from above created nations through their manipulations; but as Hobsbawm delved further into the problem, it became clear that the range of invented elements was broad. In need of histories and both high and low culture, nineteenth-century nations set out to invent them, mining “ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes.” Beyond the parade of “festival pavilions, structures for the display of flags, temples for offerings, processions, bell-ringing, tableaux, gun-salutes, government delegations in honour of the festival, dinners, toasts, and oratory” that constituted the present, the past itself had to be created, “so unprecedented that even historical continuity had to be invented.” Ancient groups real and fictional were rallied to the cause and joined to the present by traditions, “establishing or symbolizing social cohesion or the membership of groups, real or artificial communities...establishing or legitimizing institutions, status or relations of authority... and socialization, the inculcation of beliefs, value systems and conventions of behavior” (1983, 6, 7, 9).

The process, however, was a two-way street; set in motion from above, elements were mined from below and innovations trickled up from the

bottom. Proletarian culture, including dance and music (such as the tango and jazz), could be created in an autonomous domain but often moved upwards. Separating precisely what was from above and what from below is difficult, but Hobsbawm's valorization of below is unquestionable. This leads some to question whether Hobsbawm romanticizes vague *gemeinschaften* that are in their simplicity and virtue as imaginary or invented as the national cultures he excoriates (Lilla 1984). Reviewing *Interesting Times*, Christopher Hitchens took this line of reasoning further to see in Hobsbawm a deeply nostalgic streak: "He mourns the lost Britain of trams and bicycles and hiking and cheap lodging and labor solidarity, and he misses the intellectual companionship of a Europe, part Parisian and part Mitteleuropa" (Hitchens 2003). The elements invented from above are painted with broad strokes and garish colors, with National Socialism always lurking as the apotheosis.

Ironically, the invented nature of nationalism means it can be treated in a reductive manner, as deviationist tributaries within larger imperial currents. In his explicit discussions of the manifestations of nationalism, such as the consequences of the Treaty of Versailles, Hobsbawm simply deems them "ethnic-linguistic nation states," paying little attention to the processes by which they were actually formed or held together. Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, for example, are "constructs" with "absolutely no historical precedent [for] or logic." The Allies' secret diplomacy that "carved-up post-war Europe and the Middle East" — revealed to the world by the Bolsheviks — is also decried. The recourse to Marxist dogma on imperialism is striking (Hobsbawm 1994a, 31, 33, 34).

Nonetheless, if in theoretical terms at least nationalism in Europe and elsewhere conformed to the general pattern of invented concepts moving up and down through industrializing societies, Zionism was a complete novelty, since there was never

a serious desire for a Jewish political state, let alone a territorial state, until a Jewish nationalism was invented at the very end of the nineteenth century by analogy with the newfangled western nationalism. It is entirely illegitimate to identify the Jewish links

with the ancestral land of Israel, the merit deriving from pilgrimages there, or the hope of return there when the messiah came — as he so obviously had *not* come in the view of the Jews — with the desire to gather all Jews into a modern territorial state situated on the ancient Holy Land. (1990, 47–48)

Israel thus appears to stand for the inventedness of all nationalism.

Throughout *Age of Extremes*, the failures of both new nationalisms and, more fundamentally, Western democracies is counterpoised against the history of the left generally and Soviet Union specifically. The class struggle permeates all facets, at the expense of straightforward political history. Western fear and loathing of the Soviet Union is highlighted repeatedly, even in the face of the inevitable alliance against Hitler. The Soviets and the left led the resistance to Hitler. While the Jewish Question does not figure prominently (Auschwitz, for example, is not mentioned in the book), Hobsbawm notes carefully that some seven thousand volunteers fighting for Republican Spain “were said to be Jews” (1994a, 160n ). In more detailed analyses of nationalism, however, awkward irregularities had to be explained. Resistance to Nazi Germany saw strange hybrids, prompting Hobsbawm to suggest “antifascist *nationalism* emerged in the context of an *international* ideological civil war, in which a part of numerous national ruling classes appeared to opt for an international political alignment to the right” (1990, 146).

Israel is mentioned in *The Age of Extremes* in a only few characteristic references. In the context of wars of decolonization, nothing is said of the War of Independence as such. Israel is, rather, lumped with South Africa and Algeria, “which popularized the subsequent widespread and infamous use of torture by electric shocks applied to tongues, nipples and genitalia, and led to the overthrow of the Fourth Republic” (1994a, 220). Elsewhere, Israel is contextualized as an imperial outpost. The American airlift to resupply Israel during the 1973 war relied on “that last hold-out of pre-war fascism, Portugal” (1994a, 245) and was also inexplicable from the point of view of American interests. As for the Soviet Union, Hobsbawm devotes

considerable effort explaining how it was epoch making, but how Marx had in effect predicted its collapse (1994a, 496–497). The failure of the Russian Revolution to spread is implicitly blamed in part on the imperialist distraction of nationalism. And as to the Soviet Union, in an instantly famous television interview Hobsbawm was asked, “What that comes down to is saying that had the radiant tomorrow actually been created, the loss of fifteen, twenty million people might have been justified?” He replied, “Yes” (1994b).

When all is said and done, however, the illegitimacy of Zionism and Israel remains unique, “so unprecedented that the historical distortions or arbitrary constructions on which it is based are readily visible, and so are their dangers” (Hobsbawm 1999, 5). Their sheer illegitimacy dramatically revised Jewish history.

The only history that Israel can use to justify itself is history that is at least two thousand years old. Everything else that has happened in the meantime is glossed over, as it does not justify the foundation of Israel and the war which that state has fought. The fact that the Temple had been located in Jerusalem was transformed into a modern political fact, in order to argue that Jerusalem had always been the center of the Jewish people (besides, it makes little sense to talk about capitals in a period previous to the Roman Empire, but that is another question). (Hobsbawm with Polito 1999, 26)

Certain nationalist inventions are dwelt upon in detail.

Hobsbawm also denigrates the very means by which Jews and Israel use the past: “This process has been carried through on the whole by hiding those aspects of the story that did not suit the nationalist objective. Israel is only an example, albeit an excellent one, because Israeli archaeology, which was highly politicized right from the beginning, has neglected nearly all other aspects of archaeology to concentrate on justifying the foundations of a national and patriotic ideology” (Hobsbawm and Polito 1999, 27).

Indeed, the legitimacy of any history written by Jews *about* Jews is suspect:

Finally, I cannot but add that no serious historian of nations and nationalism can be a committed political nationalist, except in the sense in which believers in the literal truth of the Scriptures, while unable to make contributions to evolutionary theory, are not precluded from making contributions to archaeology and Semitic philology. Nationalism requires too much belief in what is patently not so. As Renan said: “Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation.” Historians are professionally obliged not to get it wrong, or at least to make an effort not to. To be Irish and proudly attached to Ireland — even to be proudly Catholic-Irish or Ulster Protestant Irish — is not in itself incompatible with the serious study of Irish history. To be a Fenian or an Orangeman, I would judge, is not so compatible, any more than being a Zionist is compatible with writing a genuinely serious history of the Jews; unless the historian leaves his or her convictions behind when entering the library or the study. Some nationalist historians have been unable to do so. Fortunately, in setting out to write the present book I have not needed to leave my non-historical convictions behind. (Hobsbawm 1990, 13)

Left unasked is whether to be a communist is compatible with being an historian of any sort.

Eric Hobsbawm is a “ruthless cosmopolitan,” perhaps a near archetypal example (Laqueur 2003). He is at home everywhere but nowhere: his influence on the field of history is ever-present, but his views are unchangeable, even as the world has changed around him. His obsession with Jews and Judaism, Israel and Zionism; his keen antipathy to them as barely concealed proxies for nationalism and chauvinism; and his eagerness to incorporate his disapproval into nearly everything he writes begs for explanation. He has offered the personal dimension in his autobiography — a childhood of deep loss, the faith of the convert and the missionizing of the evangelist, and the deep need to remain on the move. Does this explain his anger? Perhaps, but contingent impediments have prevented the realization of Hobsbawm’s world, and Israel is deeply implicated.

As many have noted, Europe and Israel are uniquely linked. This is a central problem for Hobsbawm. Jewish history in Europe gave rise to Israel, both theoretically and practically, and Israel and Zionism are legitimated by Europe. Israel stands as a rebuke to the twinned European projects of postnationalism and forgetting the recent past. For Hobsbawm, both of these are necessary components of throwing off the false consciousness that swept the world with the rise of nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century. But Israel and the US are forthright in their different nationalisms and provide constant reminders to Europeans of their vastly more sordid experiences with nationalism, deracination, and political impotence (Joffe 2002, 2005). For Hobsbawm, Israel ties Europe to its past and retards it from imagining its universalist future.

The final page of his autobiography is devoted to an attack on Herzl, Zionism, and the American empire, Hobsbawm's old enemies united for an old-new cause. For Hobsbawm to delegitimize Israel through continual vilification aims at releasing Europe from any responsibility toward the Jewish state. To delegitimize the US negates the "winner" of the Cold War — its values and perspective — which barely exists for him outside of New York City. In both cases history is unlinked from the present. His animus was doubly intensified after the US "implausibly decided on September 11, 2001, that the cause of freedom was again engaged on another life-or-death struggle against another evil" (2002, 403–403). As for the Jews, they should either embrace universalism, as he has, or content themselves to wander. He remains true to this conviction. In a piece entitled "Benefits of Diaspora," he comments on the "disappointing contribution of Israel" to the sum of Nobel winners when compared to Jews elsewhere, and he notes, "There is no historic precedent for the triumph of the *Aufklärung* in the post-Holocaust diaspora. Nevertheless, there are those who wish to withdraw from it into the old segregation of religious ultra-Orthodoxy and the new segregation of a separate ethnic-genetic state-community" (2005). Judaism and nationalism are paired, twin paths to failure and unhappiness.

Hobsbawm resembles Toynbee (whom Isaiah Berlin called a "theologian in historical clothing") (Berlin 1996) as well as Popper (Hacohen 1999,



145–149) in his expectation that coelacanths, having survived against all odds, would do their duty and lead the way to their own extinction — and to the extinction of all difference. In the communist future, we were all to be farmed fish, each according to our needs and abilities, presumably overseen by all-seeing fish farmers. But Hobsbawm himself ironically demonstrated one other aspect of Toynbee's conception — the role of adversity. Faced with the challenges of modernity, some coelacanthic Jews responded with a universalism explicitly designed to lead to their own demise. Others chose nationalism. Not understanding the desire to belong to something other than the inevitable monoculture that failed, Hobsbawm cannot forgive.

## Conclusion

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Each of the three historians discussed here understood nationalism the way he experienced it: as a dialectic of dislocation and relocation. For Kedourie it was an alien and bizarre figment imported half-baked by Zionists and Iraqi nationalists alike, at odds with prevailing customs and beliefs and promulgated by high school teachers, scheming politicians, and street corner agitators. Religion and constitutionalism were bulwarks against revolutions where all suffered. For Gellner, nationalism was a strange force that tried to bridge the unbridgeable — the broken world of the Habsburg Empire and its many dilemmas, the high culture of cities and low culture of villages, the certitudes of the muddy *shtetls* and the anomie of the urban streets — through print culture and, above all, language. At the root, men had to be committed to reason, even if they had their doubts. Finally, for Hobsbawm nationalism is a false consciousness that intruded unfairly into spaces opened up by huge historical and personal forces that threw individuals back on their wits, and with its petty inventions forestalled the emergence of the universal family. That universalism, however, could only be achieved through the party.

Each understood nationalism with a contrasting set of historical methods and goals. Kedourie was an historian in the most traditional sense — a scholar of the past, concerned primarily with establishing what happened and secondarily with charting how the follies of the past influence the follies of the present. Gellner was an historian of the present — that is to say, a philosophical anthropologist concerned with the past as a way of understanding the cultural and mental complexities of the modern world. And Hobsbawm remains an historian of the future, whose concern with history is conditioned by his service to the creation of particular sort of future. In this light one must ask whether Hobsbawm is an historian at all.

But for all three Jews, Zionism, and Israel were prompts for the study of nationalism and its problems, religion and ethnicity, the nation and the state, and, fundamentally, conflicting identities.

Each also understood nationalism and history according to what kind of Jew he was. A traditional or practicing Jew, Kedourie believed in only one inevitable force and saw neither triumph of reason or glory of romance at work in history. History was what it was — men and their decisions, more folly than glory — and protection from the evils that men invariably did could be found only in law and God. The assimilated Jew, Gellner believed in reason tempered by reality, equal parts David Hume and Ibn Khaldun. Evolution was real, but it had to be defended against temptation from irrationalism, from Wittgenstein to Marx to Freud. But he felt in some undefined way the attraction of belonging, even if he could not himself belong or believe. And the non-Jewish Jew, Hobsbawm, believes in the prescribed religious path to the future — a state of being where belonging is shared by all, brought about however by a faith held by few. He is, paradoxically, the most religious of the three. Nationalism, the problem, and Israel, the proxy, created diverse challenges to these ways of thinking.

According to the terms and problems it defines for itself, the modernist position on nationalism is entirely correct. Kedourie perceptively saw the origins of the nationalist idea and its *language* as specifically European — the product of disaffected German intellectuals which subsequently spread around the world and fundamentally conditioned local identities and politics. Gellner was correct seeing this process as intimately connected to the profound dislocations caused by industrialization, hastened by print culture, and contained, if briefly, by loose, contradictory liberal-autocratic empires. And Hobsbawm's emphasis on the invented elements, exchanged from above and below, as part of a matrix of identity components is also correct. Zionism, the quintessence of old-new nationalism, confounded each in turn. To paraphrase Gellner, making bourgeois Europeans into Middle Eastern peasants and then assimilating Middle Eastern coreligionists to a secular ideal was no mean feat.

All are correct, and yet all are inadequate. Kedourie took identity for

granted as endlessly fluid and consequently he focused only on large-scale politics. Gellner could not fully apprehend belonging and belief as human constants, wild cards in an otherwise rational model of social formations. And Hobsbawm sees practically everything as invented, ignoring what is in fact old or real, implicitly endorsing a romantic concept, returning to the real through ideological imposition. Preferring politics, reason, or ideology, each of these men contends uncomfortably to varying degrees with the idea that humans may desire to live in settings where politics are largely consonant with culture.

But in their anti-nationalism are they compromised as analysts and as prophets? What is the proper role of empathy, as opposed to advocacy, in an historian? Their attitudes toward Israel, Jews, and Zionism reflect varying degrees of understanding and sympathy not simply for their own people, but for all caught up in the contradictions of the modern. For two, these attitudes changed over time. To appreciate, explain, and convey the choices made to adapt and survive — the ways in which communities and individuals sought meaning in two centuries of dislocation, catastrophe, and genocide — requires empathy, perhaps ultimately for the nation-state itself.

From Baghdad to Prague to Berlin to a few square miles of London, Judaism, rationalism, and communism all found homes and security. If that is not an endorsement for the liberal nation-state, what is?

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